



# THE DIOCESE OF NEWCASTLE

## LONG-TERM SICKNESS ABSENCE POLICY

### 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Diocese of Newcastle recognises the need for pastoral and practical support for clergy in the event of illness and it is the aim of the Diocese to assist office holders in both maintaining a healthy lifestyle and in regaining health after a period of sickness.
- 1.2 As part of its role in doing this the Diocese needs to have in place fair and equitable procedures to deal with absence management and sickness payments.
- 1.3 This policy applies to all office holders on Common Tenure.
- 1.4 Although not all aspects of the policy will apply to those who have the freehold, the same underlying principles will apply in dealing with long-term sickness absence.

### 2. POLICY AIMS

- 2.1 Serious illness is a cause for worry and increased anxiety for any individual. Therefore, it is the aim of this policy to provide clear guidance to clergy on how they will be supported during periods of ill health and particularly during long-term sickness.
- 2.2 The policy also aims to provide clear guidelines for Senior Staff and Clergy concerning their responsibilities during periods of sickness.

### 3. PRINCIPLES

- 3.1 This policy and associated procedures incorporate the following principles:

#### 3.1.1 Confidentiality

Information relating to sickness absence will be held confidentially and will only be accessed by those who need the information in order to carry out their role. Medical information will be dealt with in accordance with the medical guidelines provided for this purpose.

#### 3.1.2 Fairness

The policy and procedures will be applied consistently and any action taken will be reasonable and necessary.

#### 3.1.3 Care

The Diocese will contact the office holder regularly and will endeavour to assist in providing pastoral and practical care as appropriate to the circumstances.

## **4. DEFINITION**

- 4.1 Any period of absence lasting more than four weeks will be deemed as long-term sickness. This includes:
  - 4.1.1 Long-term illness because of a single illness or disability
  - 4.1.2 Repeated periods of illness arising from a single illness or disability.
- 4.2 Long-term sickness absence will require the submission of Statements of Fitness to Work ('Fit Notes').

## **5. PROCEDURE**

### Reporting Sickness Absence

- 5.1 If clergy become incapacitated due to illness, they must inform the Accounts Assistant at Church House (the person designated for this purpose by the Diocese) on the first day of sickness. This is necessary in order to comply with the requirements for recording sickness absence for Statutory Sick Pay purposes. The designated person will ensure that the Church Commissioners are informed.
- 5.2 Clergy should also inform their churchwardens and the Area Dean

### Providing Cover for the Duties of the Office

- 5.3 Office holders must use all reasonable endeavours to make arrangements for the duties of the office to be covered by another person. This may, where appropriate involve notifying the churchwardens and the Area/Rural Dean.

### Obtaining Statements of Fitness to Work

- 5.4 For short absences lasting seven days or less, clergy need to complete a self- certificate form that can be accessed via the link [www.hmrc.gov.uk/forms/sc2.pdf](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/forms/sc2.pdf). This should be sent to the Accounts Assistant at Church House.
- 5.5 Illnesses that last more than seven days require a Statement for Fitness to Work certificate from a medical practitioner, which should be sent to the Accounts Assistant at Church House who will then forward a copy to the Church Commissioners.
- 5.6 Clergy signed off work with a Statement of Fitness to Work must inform the Archdeacon so that the Bishop and his staff are aware of the illness.
- 5.7 Clergy signed off work with a certificate that states that they are not fit for work must not undertake any duties. This is so that they can concentrate on making a good recovery but also to ensure that those in the parish(es) are clear about the situation.

### Contact by the Diocese

- 5.8 During a period of long-term sickness, the Area Dean and Archdeacon will maintain regular contact. The frequency of the contact will depend on the nature of the illness but the contact should occur at least once per month.
- 5.9 The main purpose of this contact will be to provide support to the individual and family, if appropriate, and to ensure that cover is provided for the duties of the office.

- 5.10 If there are concerns about the physical or mental health of an office holder, the Diocesan Bishop may direct the office holder to undergo a medical examination carried out by a medical practitioner selected by agreement between the Bishop and the office holder. If there is no agreement then there will be an examination by medical practitioners consisting of a practitioner chosen by each party.

Procedure on Return to Work

- 5.10 Prior to return to work from long-term sickness the Archdeacon will discuss with the office holder the arrangements for their return and whether any particular adjustments are required on either a short term or long-term basis.

## **6. SUPPORT DURING LONG-TERM SICKNESS**

Pastoral Support

- 6.1 The Archdeacon will liaise with the office holder during a period of long-term sickness to provide the most appropriate pastoral support. This might include putting the individual in touch with those who are able to provide professional or practical support.
- 6.2 It is expected that further support will be provided through the Area/Rural Dean and other colleagues in the Deanery.
- 6.3 In addition, the Diocese will work with individuals to seek out information that may help with their circumstances, and where appropriate and wanted, put people in touch with others known to the Diocese who may have knowledge of/been through similar circumstances and can offer support.

Professional Counselling Support

- 6.4 The Diocese offers a confidential counselling and support service that clergy suffering from long-term illness may wish to access. This is also available to their families.
- 6.5 The service is offered by qualified and experienced counsellors but is completely independent. Information on who uses the service and the help they receive is not made available to the Bishop and Senior Staff in the diocese.
- 6.6 The service can be accessed by contacting the Rev'd Peter Kenney

Professional Medical Advice

- 6.7 During a period of long-term sickness, the Diocese may take professional medical advice from an Occupation Health adviser on what is most appropriate for an individual.
- 6.8 The Occupational Health professional will look at nature of work, workload, current family and other pressures, and priorities, and give their advice on what is realistic particularly when a return to work is being envisaged.

Financial Support

- 6.9 If the sickness absence should result in financial hardship for any reason, the diocese will provide information on grants and other benefits that may be available from appropriate bodies. The diocese will assist with applications to such bodies where appropriate.

## **7. RETURN TO WORK AFTER LONG-TERM SICKNESS**

### Phased Return to Work

- 7.1 Following a long period of illness, it may be appropriate for an individual to have a phased return to work.
- 7.2 This should be done on the basis of medical or occupational health advice. A number of temporary adjustments including the following may be appropriate
- reduced working hours
  - reduced days
  - only working one or two 'session's' a day/week etc
  - change in role
  - reduced responsibilities
  - recommendations to assist plans for transport to and from work engagements
  - onward referral for other professional specialist advice and guidance (where appropriate these costs will be met by the Diocese),
  - any other reasonable adjustments that would be helpful
- 7.3 A phased return should not usually last for more than eight weeks and when the phased return ends, it is expected that the office holder will return to full duties.
- 7.4 The programme for the phased return should be agreed between the Archdeacon and the individual before the return to work commences.

## **8. SICKNESS PAYMENTS**

- 8.1 Clergy are entitled to receive in full any stipend which is payable in respect of their office if they are entitled to receive statutory sickness payments under part XI of the Social Security and Contributions and Benefits Act 1992(a)
- 8.2 Statutory sick pay (SSP) is payable for 28 weeks in respect of any one period of incapacity for work. One period of incapacity can be linked to another if they are separated by no more than 56 days. The linked periods constitute a single period for the purpose of calculating the maximum entitlement.
- 8.3 The payment of full stipend will include the entitlement to SSP.
- 8.4 If the sickness absence continues beyond the date when entitlement to SSP ceases, the continued payment of stipend will be at the discretion of the Diocesan Bishop.
- 8.5 In cases where the payment continues, it shall be reviewed every three months in the light of the medical evidence available.
- 8.6 After 28 weeks of SSP, the office holder is entitled to claim Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) directly from the government. Office holders will be notified by the Church Commissioners, Clergy Payments Dept when SSP ceases and will be given information on how to claim ESA. The stipend will be reduced by the amount of ESA received.
- 8.7 There is no entitlement to SSP during a phased return to work.

8.8 Where there is no prospect of the individual returning to work in the foreseeable future and all reasonable efforts have been made to resolve the situation, a decision may be taken by the Diocesan Bishop to cease payment of the stipend.

## **9. PROCEDURE IF INDIVIDUAL IS UNABLE TO RETURN TO WORK**

9.1 In the case of serious illness, it may be that an individual will not be able to return to, or maintain their duties. Should this be the situation then it should be approached with great care and sensitivity.

9.2 It is important that independent medical advice be taken before any decisions are made and that discussions should take place with the individual to establish their views on the next steps.

9.3 The diocese will explore a variety of options with the individual that could include ill health or early retirement, permanent redeployment and moving from full time to part time.

9.3 When the individual expresses the wish to retire on the grounds of ill health and their own doctor/specialist and the Occupational Health advice concurs, the Diocese through the Diocesan Secretary will make the appropriate arrangements to apply for ill health retirement through the Clergy Pension Scheme.

9.4 Where the individual is not able to move from the diocesan property into their own accommodation the Diocese will do all it can to provide assistance and/or advice.

9.5 Initially, a period of 3 months will be given to remain in the current property during which time the Diocese will work with the individual and their family to help them find appropriate alternative accommodation.

9.7 Where the individual does not wish to retire but the medical evidence indicates that they are not able to return to work then it may be necessary to pursue the matter through the Capability Procedure. This will only be undertaken as a last resort after all other routes have been explored

## **10 DISABILITY**

10.1 It is the policy of the diocese to put in place reasonable adjustments to working practices and procedures to allow disabled office holders and employees to remain in place.

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